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The stage Irishman of the
pseudo-Celtic drama

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The Stage Irishman of the
Pseudo-Celtic Drama

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The Stage Irishman of the
Pseudo-Celtic Drama

(Yeats, W. B.)

By

^{Frank}
F. Hugh O'Donnell

"No normal Irishman would have expected an Irish audience to regard with equanimity an Irish peasant kicking about, no matter in what extremity, an image of the Virgin. The mind of Mr Yeats and his artistic sympathies had been moulded away from Ireland."

—Mr STEPHEN GWYNN.

"To speak of Mr Yeats's verse or of his prose tales as an interpretation of Irish character is profoundly to misinterpret that character."—*Cyclopædia of English Literature*.

"An Irish audience which could sit at such a play must have sadly degenerated, both in religion and patriotism."—CARDINAL LOGUE.

London

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The Stage Irishman of the Pseudo-Celtic Drama

INTRODUCTION

THE following Notes had their origin in the ardent panegyric of Mr W. B. Yeats's "Irish National Theatre" pronounced by the Hon. Secretary of the Irish Literary Society of London a couple of months ago. What made Mr Stephen Gwynn's sudden paroxysm of enthusiasm over the Yeatsite Drama somewhat peculiar was the fact that "it was not always so." Only three years ago the Yeatsite Drama was to Mr Stephen Gwynn, as to more consistent people, an "exotic" product, "alien" to the Irish genius as to the Irish soil, and too often a desecration of national legend and an outrage to national sentiment. I had not much

knowledge indeed of Mr Gwynn previous to the occasion on which he produced himself for my benefit last February. But I had heard of his indictment of the Pseudo-Irish Theatre, just as I had heard that he had written a pleasing volume in a picturesque series of county guide books promoted by a leading publisher. I was quite unaware whether he was literary artist or literary operative. I own my misfortune. But I am a busy man. Most of my interests are out of England. I have neither time nor inclination to observe the printed output of one in a hundred of that new generation which, like Mr Stephen Gwynn, had hardly quitted its baby petticoats long after I had taken my Master's degree and had been elected a parliamentary representative of my nation.

I have a good deal more knowledge of Mr W. B. Yeats. He is nearer my contemporaries. He is on the brink of that sedate rubicon of middle age, the Fortieth Year. Besides, Mr W. B. Yeats is a much better advertised as well as more distinguished person than Mr Stephen Gwynn. He takes care of that. The rapt gaze and the ethereal contemplations of the Mystic Minor Poet are quite compatible with sound commercial principles. But that is

Mr Yeats's affair. Why should he hide his light? I should not have troubled even about his combination of Professor of Extreme Nationalism and Dramatic Entertainer to Dublin Castle.

Unfortunately Mr W. B. Yeats has not been content with expressing his own visions. In his plentiful innocence of ancient and modern history and literature, some impish fate drew him to select his innocence of Irish history and letters as the special sphere of his advertisements. He sought to make the legends of the Gael and the ancient heroes and heroines of Gaelic Ireland the vehicles, or the pretexts, of the most un-Gaelic and un-Irish conceptions which it is possible to conceive. He proclaimed to the British public that he had a message to deliver from the Celtic Past, and too often his Celtic Past never existed anywhere outside his own productions, except, perhaps, somewhere between the *Theatre Libre* and the *Chat Noir*. His occult mission, it seemed, was to celebrate the wedding of Madame Blavatsky and Finn MacCumhail. A sort of witch's cauldron of aboriginal superstition and Ibsenite neo-paganism was declared to be the permanent spring of Celtic genius and Celtic religion. Sometimes

he soiled a Gaelic Saga. Sometimes he caricatured it.

Mr Stephen Gwynn, in the extracts I shall quote later, describes with sufficient accuracy the inherent falsity of this pseudo-national literature. It may really be said that, for a time at least, the title of "The Irish National Theatre" was entirely correct, except that it was not Irish, it was not national, and it had very amateurish claims to be a theatre. Trivialities, belonging to no land in particular, decadent commonplaces from the decadent Bohemias of the twentieth century—the ineffable superiority, for instance, of Minor Poets to all Kings whatever, and the mania of bereaved widows to conclude second nuptials; such were some of the antique products of this pseudo-Celtic Muse. I hope I should say rather this pseudo-Celtic phase of what may yet develop into something nobly national.

Mr W. B. Yeats has himself, in his affecting sketch, "Kathleen-Ni-Houlahan," shown what he can do when he follows nature and history. I wish him success in that ambition. I condemn only what I feel to be condemnable.

As for the scheme of an "Irish Literary Theatre" in itself, even in my criticisms of the

crudity of that nauseous "Countess Cathleen," I wrote of the great field that lay before the true Irish dramatist. "Literature racy of the Irish soil" has not waited for Ibsen-cum-Blavatsky to be an ideal of Irish Nationalism, and some closing lines from my former condemnation of Mr W. B. Yeats's pseudo-Celtic treatment of a pseudo-Celtic story will illustrate quite sufficiently to-day my standpoint from the commencement in this matter :—

"There is rich material, there is a noble mission, for a Celtic Theatre in Ireland. The story of our race is full of themes the most tender, the most tragic, the most heroic, the most divine. From the waters that heard the lament of the Swan Children, to the legend-haunted Glens of Kerry ;—from the mead where fell the Dane, to the shores whence the Wild Geese flew away ;—our land is full of memories such as were never outrivalled in the dramatic poetry of any country of the world. If the mind has not arisen which could be the *Æschylus* or *Sophocles* of such a history, at least there is no reason for tolerating the preposterous absurdity—"made in Germany" it is now explained—which would degrade Ancient Ireland into this sort of witch's cavern of ghouls and vampires, and abject men and women, and blaspheming shapes from hell. I am sorry to have to say this, but it must be said."

MR W. B. YEATS'S OFFENSIVENESS
ON IRISH RELIGION

I AM careful to make no accusation against Mr Yeats's intentions. His state of mind and information may fully account for the manner in which he misrepresents Celtic Ireland without any reference to his intentions. I have always regarded him as a writer who applies Irish names to cover his own private views, pretty much as certain authors used to apply Greek and Roman names to cover ideas which were indigenous to the banks of the Seine and Thames in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Mr Yeats writes a sort of Maeterlinckish-Ibsenitish-Baudelairian drama, or what he calls a drama, and labels his characters, Maire, and Cathleen, and Oona, and Grania, and Diarmuid, and Conan, and Shemus, and Maurteen. He says, "the scene is in Ancient Ireland." He might just as well have gone to his dictionary for Brutus, and Antony, and Scipio, and Tullia, and Julia, and Faustina, and written, "the scene is in Ancient Rome." He cannot well be accused of forging a sham antique. Even had he the desire to forge, as a

forgery it would be a failure. Tottenham Court Road never turned out anything quite so obvious in Old Baronial Furniture.

The astounding offensiveness of Mr Yeats's productions towards Irish Catholic Religion can be explained in this way. He is merely constructing an impossible country, with impossible priests and people, out of his own head, as the children say; and when he labels them Irish, he commits the most insulting things conceivable, while he is merely achieving what he thinks "a poetic creation."

Take the repulsive description of the killing a priest, while reading his breviary too, by the Demon Merchant in the "Countess Cathleen," that ridiculous and offensive absurdity, which even Mr Stephen Gwynn, in 1901, called "exotic" and "alien," the work of a man "whose artistic sympathies had been moulded away from Ireland." But, though the precious drama was "exotic" and "alien," and abominable in idea and execution, still it was actually presented upon a Dublin stage, with Mr Yeats in full feather as "the Irish Shakespeare," as Mr George Moore intimated, and with a whole *claque* of highly-genteel patrons come to applaud him as vehemently as Mr Stephen

Gwynn does in 1904. The scene, remember, is an Ancient Ireland of Mr Yeats's gentle fancy, with "five score baronies" of apostate Catholics selling their souls to fill their hunger; and the priest to be killed so ignominiously by the Demon is a priest of this famine-struck and apostate flock. Now we all of us can be judges here. Now, we all of us, Protestant and Catholic, know how Irish Catholic priests behaved in times of hunger and famine in Ireland. Did it ever occur to anybody except a Symbolic Pseudo-Celt to intimate that precisely such a time made them apt slaves of hell? The thing is really too funny, but we must try to be serious. Mr Yeats makes the Catholic priest the ready prey of the demons, who shove his soul into their black bag—even though the poor clergyman was actually reading his breviary! We could understand a priest being snapt up in an act of sin, but in an act of prayer! I quote the precious stuff.

"ACT II. SCENE 2.—*Enter the two DEMONS disguised as merchants, with empty bags over their shoulders.*

First Merchant. And whence now, brother?

Second Merchant. Tubber-vanach cross roads,
Where I, in image of a nine-monthed bonyeen,
Sat down upon my haunches. Father John

Came, sad and moody, murmuring many prayers.
I seemed as though I came from his own sty.
He saw the one brown ear—the breviary dropped—
He ran—I ran—I ran into the quarry ;
He fell a score of yards. The man was dead.
And then I thrust his soul into the bag,
And hurried home.”

This was one of the extracts on which Cardinal Logue founded his indignant condemnation of the Yeatsite production. To the Irish Catholic, to the cultivated Protestant, it will probably appear that a more offensive and disgusting outrage on the Catholic's veneration for the priestly mission can hardly be imagined. In my protest published at the time I wrote :—

“Good old Father John, in spite of his prayers and his breviary, killed by the devil in the shape of a brown pig! How Irish! How exquisitely Celtic!”

I repeat that I do not touch Mr Yeats's intentions. He intends probably nothing more than to employ any material he finds handy for his poetico-dramatic muse. But there must be limits to the Minor Poet, and the Major Poet too, in such matters. Dead paganisms and living Christianity must be treated with very different measures of licence. Calvary is not Olympus. Besides, there is the question of

sheer ignorance of Irish Catholic belief. It is sheer silliness to talk of a demon having the power, according to Irish faith, to kill a priest in the midst of "many prayers" and stick his soul in a bag!

Unfortunately Mr W. B. Yeats often shows this amazing ignorance of the faith of the Celts he pretends to reveal to the British Public. I remember a miniature drama of his, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, turns on another revolting burlesque of Irish Catholic religion. Still more than the *Countess Cathleen*, this playlet appears to be instinct with dechristianisation, conscious or unconscious. The scene is laid in Sligo a hundred years ago, and it is related how the Evil Spirits drew away to faery land a young and loving bride, in spite of prayer, and priest, and crucifix. Indeed, Mr W. B. Yeats introduces a duel of influence between the Child of Evil and the priest for poor Maire Bruin's soul, in which the priest and his God are as easily vanquished as was Father John by the Brown Pig-Devil cited above. And this, too, though the doomed girl herself joins her entreaties for the aid of Heaven.

"Queen of the Angels and kind Saints defend us!"

Yet if there be one thing more deeply rooted in the heart of the Irish Catholic, peasant or peer, it is the conviction that no Power of Hell can hurt or harm those who invoke the sacred names, and who are protected by the ministry of priest and the supplication of the faithful. Mr W. B. Yeats deliberately sets the Demon Child against Our Saviour, and it is Our Saviour who is routed in that struggle for a redeemed and baptised soul!

"Father Hart. By the dear name of the One Crucified, I bid you, Maire Bruin, come to me.

The Demon Child. I keep you in the name of your own heart!"

So Maire Bruin flings away the One Crucified and takes up the symbol of the Evil Power; and, by a crowning absurdity it is explained that this happens because the Priest himself took down and hid the crucifix!

The scene of the Hiding of the Crucifix—and by the Priest too!—is a specimen of this "Irish National Drama," which simply beggars description. I must quote it in its full idiotcy and painful impiety. The Child of Evil in winning form has entered the house, and among other pretty things will dance for her

kind entertainers. (The Priest also is present—in order to hide the Crucifix!) Here follows literally from the book of the play :

“(The CHILD is about to dance, but suddenly sees the crucifix, and shrieks and covers her eyes.)

The Child. What is that ugly thing on the black cross?

Father Hart. You cannot know how naughty your words are!

That is our Blessed Lord!

The Child. Hide it away!

Bridget Bruin. I have begun to be afraid again!

The Child. Hide it away!

Maurteen Bruin. That would be wickedness!

Bridget Bruin. That would be sacrilege!

The Child. The tortured thing!

Hide it away!

Maurteen Bruin. Her parents are to blame.

Father Hart. That is the image of the Son of God!

The Child. Hide it away! Hide it away!

Maurteen Bruin. No! No!

Father Hart. Because you are so young and little a child

I will take it down. (!!!)

The Child. Hide it away,

And cover it out of sight and out of mind.

(FATHER HART *takes it down and puts it in the inner room.*)”

In meeting blasphemous twaddle of this sort, the doubt which naturally presents itself to healthy minds is, whether the author wrote as cynic or as booby, whether he meant to make

the Priest ridiculous and odious, or whether he really thought he was writing something fine, and noble, and true to Irish nature and religion. Search the whole of Ireland, in any epoch, and conceive the possibility of an Irish priest, in order to appease the frantic dislike of an impish urchin, actually taking down the Symbol of Redemption, and, in spite of the protests of his Christian flock, hiding it away "out of sight and out of mind." On the contrary, a priest, like the flock, would have suspected brimstone on the instant, and the Child of Evil, instead of being gratified by the disgrace of the "ugly thing on the black cross," would have got exorcisms and holy water. I do not raise any religious question for the moment. I look only to the truth of Art. It is the very abjection and nadir of Art to construct such a monstrosity, and to call it "Celtic Ireland." The basest half-savage, the muddiest-brained survival of the Age of Fetish and Wizard whom Yeatsism might pretend to disinter in darkest island of the West, never yet believed that a priest would hide a Crucifix. Spellwork and Witchcraft might have power when Priest and Cross and Sacred Invocation were far away, but a Priest to dishonour a Crucifix! Nobody but an "Irish

Peasant" made in Bohemia-on-Thames ever included that in the folklore of Ireland.

And the excuse which Mr W. B. Yeats puts in the mouth of his apocryphal Father Hart—for some sort of excuse is felt to be necessary, even by Mr Yeats—is simply blasphemous twaddle in the utmost degree :

"We must be tender with all budding things.
Our Maker let no thought of Calvary
Trouble the morning stars in their first song." (!!!)

And so it is "tenderness to a budding thing" to hide away the sweet, grave face of the Dead Christ, who said, "Let little children come unto Me." I know no music-hall rant so utterly and mawkishly demoralizing as a caricature of Christianity like this.

Mr W. B. Yeats's doltish "Irish Priest" goes on to say to the Imp : "I love you"—for abominating the Crucifix?—and gets the answer which the most doltish might comprehend:—

The Child. "But you love Him above."

A revelation of the demonish nature of "The Child" which still provokes from Mr Yeats's "Irish Priest" not a reproof of "The Child," but of the poor bride, who had prayed at such

blasphemy: "Queen of the Angels and kind Saints defend us!", and this astounding defence of the Christ-loathing, God-hating Imp:—

Father Hart. "You fear because of her wild, pretty prattle ;
She knows no better." (!!!)

Again it must be asked, does the Minor Poet write as cynic or as booby?

I see that an Irish M.P., the author of a panegyric in the *New Liberal Magazine* of the new "Irish Drama," holds that the playlet, which contains the above stuff, "combines wonderful literary beauty with admirable acting qualities." It is a very ugly fact that there is a conspicuous class of more or less Irish persons who absorb with delectation the worst which the Yeatsites can produce in such caricatures of Irish religion and society.

Merely to round off this discussion, before quoting from Mr Gwynn in his pre-Yeatsite period, I shall cite that other typical scene of the True Irish (Yeatsite) Peasant in his attitude to Irish religion, the notorious Kicking to Pieces of the Shrine of the Mother of God. I copy carefully Mr W. B. Yeats, stage directions and all.

"The Scene is laid in Ireland in old times.

ACT. I.—*The cabin of SHEMUS RHUA. The door is at the back. The window is at the right side of it, and a little shrine of the VIRGIN MARY hangs at the other.*

Shemus. Satan pours the famine from his bag,
And I am mindful to go pray to him,
To cover all this table with red gold.

. . . . I would eat my supper
With no less mirth if chaired beside the hearth
Were Pooka, sowllth, or demon of the pit,
Rubbing his hands before the flame o' the pine.

[The little shrine falls.

Maire. Look! Look!

Shemus. *[Kicking it to pieces.]* The Mother of God has
dropped asleep,

And all her household things have gone to wrack."

It appears that Mr Yeats had enough of good feeling or caution to withdraw this detestable scene from the acted version of his drama. He has restored it, however, to the printed volume of his masterpieces, and the painful fact is an illustration alike of his knowledge and his love of Celtic Ireland. I read how the Yeatsite panegyrist in the *New Liberal Review* explains that the horrible and outrageous blasphemy was not actually put on the boards at Dublin out of consideration for "the prejudices of the people." Good Heavens! The prejudices of the people!

Is there a Christian who is a Christian who could tolerate for a single instant "the kicking to pieces of the Shrine of the Mother of God" in a public stage-play?

The inclusion of such an abomination in the printed edition, and the comment of the panegyrist, are both, I fear, indications that we have to do with a form of decadence whose influence may well be contamination to unripe and inexperienced minds.

Before leaving, for the present, the subject of Yeatsism and Irish Religion, I must decidedly protest against Mr W. B. Yeats's use of the most sacred and tremendous subjects of Christian Faith, God, and Trinity, and the Divine Redeemer, merely to trick out and furnish forth his silly fancies about Sowlths, and Demons, and Faeries who triumph over foolish priests like Father Hart, or who drag to damnation blameless priests like Father John. I do not concern myself with Mr Yeats's opinions any more than with his personality. He might be a devout Buddhist or a devout Baptist for all I care. "THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN" is not only a precept of the highest religion, but it is an instinctive canon of true art. Nor is it

necessary to be a Catholic Christian in order to feel this. Plato would have felt it, perhaps as reverently. Beware of misnaming the Name of Allah within reach of the sweep of an Arab sword! The Jew, the Eternal Witness, only dared to designate in thought and awe his Almighty Jehovah. But the Christian God is Jehovah, not less, nor less holy.

I have elsewhere, in my original protests against Mr Yeats's handling of the Irish Past and the Christian Faith, expressed my sense of his most offensive caricature of Catholic Ireland and the Catholic Church. As I said then :—

“The Catholic Church only appears in Shrines of the Virgin that are ‘kicked to pieces’ by Celtic peasants, and in priests who are killed by devils in the shape of pigs. We are told that the land is full of famine, and that it is the Ireland of old days. Where was the aid of friendly and generous chiefs and clansmen to the suffering district? Where was the charitable hospitality of a hundred monastic foundations, which were afterwards to be ‘kicked to pieces,’ not by Celtic peasants, but by the reformed chivalry of England? Mr W. B. Yeats seems to see nothing in the Ireland of old days but an unmanly, an impious and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins, and sprites, and sowlths, and thivishes,—just like a sordid tribe of black devil-

worshippers and fetish-worshippers on the Congo or the Niger."

In intimate connection with this repulsive presentation of our Land, must be reckoned in the first place the sneers and blasphemies placed sometimes in the mouths of demons, sometimes in the mouths of pseudo-Catholic peasants, and which are scattered with full hands in Mr Yeats's principal plays. Of course, he may reply that he is entitled to seek his dramatic effects untrammelled by religious prejudices. I say that he is not, and such excerpts as the following leave more than an unpleasant taste in the mouth :—

"The Mother of God
Has dropped in a doze, and cannot hear the poor."

" *God and the Mother of God have dropped asleep,*
For they are weary of the prayers and the candles."

"No curses injure the immortal demons,"

"Wherefore should you sadden
For wrongs you cannot hinder? *The great God,*
Smiling, condemns the lost."

Here we have the demon sneering at a woman fallen asleep on the altar steps, and blaspheming the Almighty most horribly at the same time :—

“*The Demon*. She lies worn out upon the altar steps :
A labourer tired of ploughing *His hard fields*,
And deafening *His closed ears* with cries on cries,
Hoping to draw His hands down from the stars
To take the people from us.”

Here we have the demon boasting of Satan's power to overthrow God himself!

“*The Demon*. My master will break up the sun and moon,
And quench the stars in the ancestral night,
And overturn the throne of God and the angels.”

Surely Mr Yeats will not pretend that any Irish peasant, however debased, could credit this. Even though Mr Yeats may correctly interpret the sentiments of the Court of Hell, what has this to do with the Celtic Revival? And the devils, we know, “believe and tremble.”

Again, whence does Mr Yeats derive the knowledge that the Christian doctrine of Hell being the place of punishment for the Evil Spirits is quite wrong, and that it is really a paradise of joy? What Irish tradition shows that this is the faith of the Irish Christians in any epoch? But Mr Yeats is so intent on picturing the satanic joys of Hell that he makes his demon twice yearn for them :—

"*The Demon*. What ! will you keep us from our ancient home,
And from the eternal revelry ?
. . . . Hush ! Hush ! I hear
The brazen door of Hell move on its hinges,
And the eternal revelry float hither
To hearten us."

Again, what makes Mr Yeats fancy that it is part of the Irish peasant's creed to believe that God thinks far less of the souls of poor folk than of others ? Does not Mr Yeats know that precisely the contrary is Christian teaching ?

"*A Peasant*. Do not, do not ; the souls of us poor folk Are not precious to God as your soul is." (!!!)

I confess I do not like dealing with this kind of matter. The loathsome sort of profanation involved in flinging the most solemn mysteries of religion into the midst of the trivialities of a demon-and-sowlth *cum* cock-and-bull "drama" is so isolated in civilised literature that examples are wanting. If Calderon brings heavenly powers and heavenly miracles into his Autos, they were really religious actions, followed by a religious audience in a spirit of devotion and prayer. Mr Yeats exercises his quasi-Dramatic pseudo-Art for paying assemblages of miscellaneous spectators, and takes care to give the

beau rôle to the Infernal Power. Sometimes the Demon is a connoisseur of superior mark who does not grudge 500,000 crowns for a soul of superior aristocracy. Sometimes he routs the minister of religion with easy laughter in spite of the most sacred exorcisms. I quote the useless adjurations of that foolish priest, already mentioned, whom Mr Yeats has ordained for the curious priestly office of hiding the Crucifix in order to oblige the Devil! Can anything more painful be imagined than this declamation of the most tremendous mysteries before the footlights by some travestied mummer for the delectation of a pit or gallery?

“*The Priest.* I will confront this mighty spirit alone.

Be not afraid, the Father is with us,
And all the nine angelic hierarchies,
The Holy Martyrs and the Innocents,
The adoring Magi in their coats of mail,
And He who died and rose on the third day,
And Mary with her seven times wounded heart.
Cry, daughter, to the Angels and the Saints.

Daughter, I call you unto home and love.

Daughter, I point you out the way to heaven.

By the dear name of the One Crucified,
I bid you, Maire Bruin, come to me.”

But the only result is to show that these unspeakably august invocations are utterly powerless against the Evil Spirit, who slays the young bride as easily as the other demon slew Father John, and carries her soul away from home and love and Christ for ever. Of course, it is the least part of Mr Yeats's offence that the jumble and disordination of his use of Divine Names could be committed by no priest who ever was. It is the casting of the Tabernacle upon the stage, the debasement of the most awful mysteries of supreme religion to a footlights declamation, and all in order to end in the "triumph," to use Mr Yeats's own word, of the Evil Spirits over Heaven; this is the revolting and inexcusable feature of this libel on religion which is also a libel on Ireland. There never was an Irish Catholic peasant who believed that demon or spirit could overcome the Name of the Lord God and His Christ on the lips and in the presence of the Anointed Priest of the Most High.

When you pretend to be Irish and Celtic, you must follow, not outrage, Irish and Celtic sentiment. In a Russian play you cannot represent a bearded and booted moujik kicking to bits a holy ikon amid the pious applause of a

Moscow multitude. In an Ottoman play you cannot choose a devout pilgrim on his way to Mecca as specially liable to deny the Koran and Muhammed. In a drama you must at least have verisimilitude. Even though you be an ignorant and superstitious Catholic peasant, and though you may have a sneaking fear of witches and warlocks, you can never possibly dream that they can prevail against the Most High God. I am a Gael of the Gaels, the son of Gaelic-speaking Gaels, cradled in the legends and traditions of my race, and I know how Mr Yeats's parodies of Ireland are as insolently un-Irish as they are insolently incompatible with the foundations and essentials of Christian religion.

In some publications by Spiritist professors or charlatans which I have read, there is an unpleasing and mawkish mixture, a sloppy agnosticism, a canting religiosity, an advertising occultism, a brazen familiarity, as it were, with holy things, changing to a mouthing mockery of them, the whole being vague, stilted, and swollen. I do not think that this style is a good example for anybody to follow either in prose or poetry, but, whatever are the defects of Mr Yeats's dramas, it must not be supposed

his poems also bear no trace of his weaknesses. The presumptuous intimacy with the Highest, the jumbling of Sacred and Accursed, the systematic misstatement of what is venerated beyond expression by every ordinary man in our country; all these ugly qualities come out, for instance, in the following unpleasant poem about the Archangel Michael and an apparently female person, called The Rose of Peace. I do not think its trashy irreverence could be easily excelled.

“ If Michael, leader of God’s host,
 When Heaven and Hell are met,
Looked down on you from Heaven’s doorpost,
 He would his deeds forget. (!!!)

Brooding no more upon God’s wars
 In his Divine homestead,
He would go weave out of the stars
 A chaplet for your head.

And all folks seeing him bow down, (!!!)
 And white stars tell your praise,
Would come at last to God’s great town,
 Led on by gentle ways.

And God would bid his warfare cease, (!!!)
 Saying all things were well;
And softly make a rosy peace,
 A peace of Heaven with Hell.” (!!!!!!)

Is this Symbolism or Celtic Revival? Is it nightmare drivel? God would

“Softly make a rosy peace,
A peace of Heaven with Hell.” (!?)

May not the study of this Yeatsite gem of poesy and religion help us to a clearer comprehension of Mr Yeats's qualifications for the pseudo-religious and pseudo-national analysis of the Irish peasant and the Irish priest?

MR STEPHEN GWYNN'S INDICTMENT OF
YEATSITE DRAMA AND CELTICISM
IN 1901

1. *Mr Gwynn calls Mr Yeats an Exotic Alien, and expresses disgust at the Kicking to Bits of the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin.*

I must make somewhat lengthy quotations from Mr Gwynn. His style is at times diffuse, but he bore, in 1901, manly witness against some of the anti-Irish abominations of the Yeatsite Ibsen-cum-Maeterlinck-ism. He fairly admits that Irish popular opinion deeply resented

the incredible grossness and impiety of the "Countess Cathleen," that Catholic Press and Primate denounced it as a scandal to religion and patriotism, and he caustically observes that this play which pretended to be "representatively Irish" was at precisely the opposite pole to the most sacred traditions of Ireland. I mark with *Italics* some leading points in Mr Gwynn's denunciation, in 1901, of the Yeatsite abortion.

"It must be allowed that *this was not a very hopeful beginning* for an enterprise that was to rest upon popular sympathy and support in Ireland. And, as some were not slow to point out, it showed to how considerable an extent *the first play produced as representatively Irish was in reality exotic. No normal Irishman would have expected an Irish audience to regard with equanimity an Irish peasant kicking about, no matter in what extremity, an image of the Virgin. The mind of Mr Yeats and his artistic sympathies have been moulded away from Ireland*; the public which he conceived or assumed was the public that applauds Maeterlinck. And *the same alien element* was apparent in the work of Mr Martyn, who, although a landowner and Deputy-Lieutenant of County Galway, had lived and made his friendships in Paris. It was a coincidence that he should have hit upon a dramatic idea previously treated by Strindborg—the dilemma of a wife who feels herself impelled in self-protection to swear her husband into a lunatic asylum—but the coincidence proved that Mr Martyn was working

under the influence of Ibsen and his imitators, and every line of the play bore out that suggestion."

"Moulded away from Ireland!" "An alien element!" A Sham Maeterlinck outraging the inmost sentiments of an Irish audience!

Mr Stephen Gwynn was quite a Daniel come to judgment—in 1901.

In fact, Mr Stephen Gwynn, extreme Yeatsite to-day, was so shocked by the offensiveness of the Yeatsite school—in 1901—that he seems to have gone bald-headed at everybody who even spoke too well of the Sham National Theatre. Mr George Moore is the butt of the following bit of lively criticism:—

"It gave fair warrant for Mr George Moore to proclaim the first quickening of an artistic life in Ireland. Unhappily Mr Moore thought it necessary to add an account of his own migrations, and to indulge in contumelious criticism of contemporary English taste, backed by the accompanying assertion that '*no one except Shakespeare and Mr Yeats*' had successfully written a blank-verse play. *Nobody supposed that Mr Moore attached any serious meaning to this statement*; and one was forced to conclude that the promoters of the enterprise desired to promote press comment *by employing Mr Moore, metaphorically speaking, to stand on his head in public*. The employment was unfortunately continued."

2. *Mr Gwynn calls Mr Yeats and Mr Moore profaners of Irish Epic Legend, and expresses disgust at their degradation of the Epic Romance of Diarmuid and Grania to a Sensual French Novel. The exotic and alien element again.*

Mr Gwynn, in 1901, did not confine himself to exposing the alien and repulsive character of the First Yeatsite Drama. He took up the analysis of the sort of Palais Royal travesty of "Diarmuid and Grania" in which Messrs Moore and Yeats were collaborators, and he shows that the Heroic Legend fared as foully at the hands of the Yeatsites as Irish Religion and the Christian Heaven. This is all a very downright and effective piece of criticism. Mr Gwynn straightway takes the bull by the horns, and tells Yeats and Co. that they have not dramatized the epic romance, but have only set a dirty French Novel in a spurious background of Irish legend. Mr Gwynn is probably not what I call a Nationalist, but he shows quite a Nationalist's nauseated horror at the Minor Poet's sacrilege.

"I do not think *Diarmuid and Grania* an admirable production! I do not think it was irreproach-

ably acted. . . . People said, and not without reason, that Mr Moore and Mr Yeats had gone to Irish legend to find in epic tradition the plot of an average French novel."

There is the whole Art of the Yeatsites in a nutshell. Instead of reverently interpreting the Past, they sully the Past by travestying it, even raddling and painting it to the similitude of those "*Petites dames de Chez Maxim*" or the draggled frequenters of the *Café Médicis* and the *Boul' Mich'*. I shall give at length the main portions of Mr Gwynn's strenuous and trenchant criticism.

There is no more delicious and stirring romaunt of bygone heroism and chivalry than this Old-Irish tale of Diarmuid and Grania. The immortal lovers of this Irish epic are a nobler Tristan and Iseult, also a daughter of a King of Ireland. They are a Romeo and Juliet of heroic mould. Grania, fairest maiden, lacks at long last the grace of eternal fidelity. But as Mr Gwynn finely observes, "she is not represented as disloyal to Diarmuid while he lives." We can close our eyes to a sweet woman's weakness, but not merely weakness but foulness is the very essence of the character of the bride of Diarmuid according to the

Yeatsite parody. To make her hero-spouse a cuckold, just as in a yellow-backed French novel, to stain the honour of the Gaelic Prince and Knight without reproach on whom she had laid bonds of chivalry to save her—that is the “Irish National Drama” of Yeatsism. But, Mr Gwynn will speak, and his criticisms will explain the enormity. I italicize the references to the pollution of the legend in the Yeatsite version. As for discriminating between the part of Mr Yeats and that of Mr Moore, I cannot see that there can be divided responsibility in the case of joint authorship and joint publication. Personally I should like to think, like Mr Gwynn, that Mr Yeats is inclined to take the higher view.

“Diarmuid in the legend sacrifices none of his heroic attributes; he yields to a point of chivalrous honour. *In the play he yields simply to an over-mastering desire*, and Oisín and Caoilte, instead of bidding him fly, bid him remain; they refuse him their hands when he goes out. I do not say that it was possible so to represent it on the stage; I do say that *in the legend Diarmuid is swayed by other things than sexual desire*. . . .

“Then follow in the romance the wanderings of Diarmuid and Grania, and their escapes from Finn pursuing them. This is the part of the legend that has really taken hold of the popular imagination, for

all over Ireland are shown rocks and caves that bear the name of the lovers—the ‘beds of Diarmuid and Grania.’ Throughout all this, Diarmuid is shown as the champion without fear and without reproach, except in so far as he departed from his original purpose and lay by Grania as her husband. All of this, inevitably, the play omits. . . .

“It is here that *we lose entirely the epic tradition, and find instead the quintessence of numberless French novels.* Grania in the legend is the mother of many children. Grania in the play is barren and insatiable as the sea. Grania in the legend desires to show her greatness and prosperity, and calls Finn and Cormac to a feast that is a year in the preparing and a year in the eating. Grania in the play uses the plea of desire for society and a more varied life simply as a pretext to bring Finn within the reach of her eyes. *Diarmuid in the legend is a hero in his retirement; Diarmuid in the play is a man in whom uxoriousness has grown to a disease, sick with a perpetual craving for what Grania is not wearied of giving, but desires to give elsewhere. . . .*

“But she is not represented in the legend as disloyal to Diarmuid while he lives. Mr Moore would probably retort that it is essential to his plot that she should be so represented. Precisely. *It is the plot of the average French novel.* Why, then, force it into a legend which gives no warrant for it, and set it to accompaniment of thunder and lightning? *The scene in the third Act, where Diarmuid tells Grania that he will ‘let the lust out of her’ with his sword, is only less disagreeable than the conclusion of the action when*

she and Finn exchange significant glances across Diarmuid's dead body."

To debase the finest of Irish legends into an adulterous French novel, there is a Celtic Revival for you! But the fate of Diarmuid and Grania is merely a particular exemplification of Mr W. B. Yeats's system of employing the names and scenes of Celtic Legend merely as vehicles for his own extremely modern and extremely prosaic ideas. What is his legendary drama of "The King's Threshold"? Merely a clumsy translation into Celtic names and scenes of that ultra-modern outcome of the Modern Minor Poet's vanity, the decadent delusion that "the Poet is superior to the King"? So we have an ancient Irish High King humbly laying his crown at the feet of a preposterous Bard, who has kept up a preposterous disturbance on the Royal doorstep. At Emania or Tara the Bard would have been lifted off that doorstep without a shovel. Augustus Cæsar did not lay his crown at the feet of Virgil even.

And as the Minor Poet is vastly superior to monarchs, he is also absolutely irresistible to female beauty. So Mr W. B. Yeats hastens to work off another drama of the Celtic Revival, in which a child of song from Montmartre or

Clapham, disguised as the Bard Forgael, so bewitches Queen Dectora, widow of the slain King of Lochlan, that she snatches up her husband's crown from the body of her new-slain lord, places it on Mr Yeats's head—I ought to say on Forgael's head—who clasps her to his Celtic-Revivalist breast, and sails away with her to the Land of Heart's Desire; which, being interpreted, is Gretna Green without the Blacksmith.

So we are always let down to the French Novel basis when this Celtic-Revival talks Gaelic history, just as we are let down to the Blavatsky-cum-Demon basis when it talks Irish religion.

3. *Mr Stephen Gwynn renews his condemnation of the Shrine-kicking episode.*

I should have mentioned sooner perhaps that, in the course of his keen analysis of the desecration of the Legend of Diarmuid and Grania, Mr Gwynn finds occasion to renew the expression of his disgust at the horrible part in the "Countess Cathleen" where a Yeatsite Irish peasant kicks to bits a Shrine of the Mother of God. In connection with an ugly scene attributing poltroonery to the chivalrous

Diarmuid, Mr Gwynn remarks truly that it is merely another instance of Mr Yeats's un-Irish characteristics. He is alien, exotic.

"But again, one perceived the exotic spirit. It was almost as impossible that an Irish audience should enjoy the representation of an Irish hero's panic as that they should welcome the sight of an Irish peasant insulting the sacred image. One felt all this on the first night, and much more strongly when I returned to see the third performance."

How one must smile over what has become of all this strong disapproval of the Alien Yates and his desecrations! How that budding Sicambrian, Mr Stephen Gwynn, has quite a quantity of matter to adore which he used to burn! Does he ever recall an echo of his war-whoops as he went for the scalp of the exotic trespasser on the Fair Hills of Holy Ireland? Funny, funny, very funny!

And those omniscient personages, the London Literary Critics! Were the log-rollers quite too many for them?

4. *Mr Stephen Gwynn on some Castle Log-rolling for Mr Yeats.*

I quote finally from Mr Stephen Gwynn a characteristic specimen of the methods employed

to work up a spurious popularity for the astounding creations of Mr W. B. Yeats and his sect. The patronage of the Genteel of Dublin—has the British Literary Critic ever heard of one John Mitchell on the Genteel of Dublin?—was the worthy prelude to the patronage of the Genteel of another place. I have merely omitted one lady's name from Mr Gwynn's anecdote. It was unnecessary to the history of the affair, which, indeed, shows, as Mr Gwynn cruelly adds, "Mr Yeats understands to perfection the arts of the propagandist."

But what an illustration it is of the incorrigible sapience of the sapient Beings sent to govern Ireland, that the choice of the Castle, when it undertakes to patronize an Irish Literary Revival, falls precisely upon a piece of offensive and exotic fustian, which is one odious libel on Ireland, and which People, Press, and Priesthood join in stigmatizing as intolerable to patriotism and religion alike!

"Even the Castle smiled upon the project, for Lady X. Y. organized a production, at the Chief Secretary's Lodge, of tableaux from Mr Yeats's play, 'The Countess Kathleen,' with which drama the experiment was to be inaugurated. *It was a good way of persuading the gentility of Dublin that there might be*

something, after all, in Mr Yeats. A good deal of preliminary discussion, at literary societies and elsewhere, followed in the succeeding months: for Mr Yeats understands to perfection the arts of the propagandist."

CONCLUSION

Little more remains to be said. Mr Yeats is welcome to the future. I have dealt with his past work. The idea of an Irish National Theatre is noble. Why should not Mr Yeats prove worthy of it? As I understand the matter, there are four or five of the lesser plays which have been produced—*Kathleen Ni Houlahan*, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, *The Twisting of the Rope*, and *Broken Soil*—which are National in the true sense, not Ibsenite, nor Maeterlinckish, nor Baudelairian. *The Bending of the Bough* is also a comedy of much power and high promise.

It must not be supposed that it has only been Mr Stephen Gwynn who found out the Yeatsite Celticism. There are others, even many others, who have never taken the pose for the achievement. I find, in the last edition of the *Cyclopædia of English Literature*, published by

Messrs Chambers, a very kindly notice of our pseudo-Celtic Bard, which contains a telling exposure of two fundamental falsities of his assumed position. The first falsity is his fundamental contention that Ireland is a special land of mysticism and demonism, sowlths, thivishes, fairies, warlocks, and the rest. The second falsity is that Mr William Butler Yeats is distinctively Irish or Celtic in any sense ancient or modern.

After admitting Mr Yeats's assumed or innate "delight in the vague, the mystical, and the unreal," the writer in the *Cyclopædia* unkindly, but accurately, adds that "these qualities are not the peculiar characteristic of Irish folklore any more than they are the peculiar characteristic of the Scandinavian sagas. In every race and in every literature, if you go back to the primitive myth and the unrecorded tradition, you go back to the vague, the mystical, and the unreal." Southern Italy at this day is haunted by as many varieties of mystical or fanciful tradition as Celtia and Scandinavia, perhaps, together. Such a poetic gem as Weber's delicious "Dreizehnlinden" is reminiscent of as much weird superstition and demon-cum-fairy-work out of Ancient Saxony as would match any grove or

glade of ancient Hellas, where every rock and rill and rustle of the leaf were quick with nymph and sprite and apparition. Mr Yeats has merely mistaken his pond for the universe of waters. A somewhat wider knowledge would have corrected his hallucination.

Again, the writer in the *Cyclopædia of English Literature* disposes of the alleged Celticism or Irishism of Mr Yeats's muse as decisively as Mr Gwynn himself. Mr Gwynn held that Mr Yeats's mind was moulded far from Ireland, that he was exotic, alien, or Maeterlinckish, but wholly external to Irish tradition and genius. Similarly it is stated in the *Cyclopædia* that, "It may be doubted whether Mr Yeats's ideas are really Irish ideas, or that his art is as Celtic as he supposes. . . . To speak of his verse or of his prose tales—charming as many of the latter are—as an interpretation of Irish character is profoundly to misinterpret that character."

Will Mr W. B. Yeats at long last take the hint from such admirers and henceforth advertise himself as strictly non-Irish and non-Celtic? A mere change in the nomenclature of his poems and dramas will suffice. He need not rewrite anything. Let him delete the Cathleens and Maurteens and Granias and Diarmuids,

and write in Blanche fleur and Ganelon and Hildegard and Parsival ; and, *presto !* the transformation is complete. The Council of the Irish Literary Society will proudly hail an original genius among the Sons of Erin in the walk of the Minnesingers or the Troubadours. The callow youths who form his choir will exult at the avatar of their Orpheus in the far domain of them who sang Gudrun and Childe Roland and Charlemaine. Or, best of all, let him take his literary gear to the land of the Arabian Nights Entertainments. The associations of Djinn and Afreet will suit his occultist genius to a hair. The briefest rebaptizing will be ample to furnish forth his Oisín or Forgael as the most perfect Sinbad the Sailor ! The further from Ireland, anyhow, Mr Yeats is kind enough to transplant his translated Cathleens and Granias the better for Irish sentiment and for Celtic tradition.

Nor need anybody apprehend a national catastrophe in consequence. Without saying that he "never will be missed," the sober fact is that Mr Yeats does not bulk very large in the vision of the Irish Nation. Take from him the Chief Secretary's Lodge and a section of congenial spirits on a section of the London

press, and his Celtic Revivalism assumes modest dimensions. As one of the keenest as well as most erudite of Celtic scholars, Mr Alfred Nutt, has remarked of the very limited popularity of the Yeatsite School in Ireland, "In so far as they are popular in Ireland, that popularity is a reflex of English opinion." The Stage Irishman of Pseudo-Celtic Drama may have many gifts and graces. Only he is not Irish. And one consequence of this *peregrinitas* and this alienation has been that the Cardinal Primate of Ireland declared that he could not conceive an Irish audience so dead to religion and patriotism as to listen to Mr Yeats's principal contribution.

F. HUGH O'DONNELL



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O'Donnell, Frank Hugh Macdonald
The stage Irishman of the
pseudo-Celtic drama

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